



Opening Hearts, Opening Doors for Refugees

What Is LIRS?

In a nation built by immigrants, LIRS has carried on the Lutheran tradition of welcoming newcomers since 1939. In the spirit of our mission and the American way, we have answered the call to serve those who cannot go home and to assist those seeking new life in a new land. With initiative and resourcefulness, LIRS has sought creative and lasting solutions to the needs of uprooted people.

LIRS lights the way to the future for immigrants, refugees and those seeking protection from countries where war an oppression have stolen their hope and threatened their very existence. We resettle refugees, reunite families and rekindle dreams. Since its founding, LIRS has given hundreds of thousands of people a new start in a new land.

LIRS assists those who are putting down new roots and reaching for new opportunities throughout our nation. Our local resettlement affiliates, our enthusiastic circle of congregations and volunteers, and our many other partners are the hands, feet and heart of our mission.

As people who were once refugees establish their own new lives, they make immeasurable economic and cultural contributions to our communities. We invite you to join with us in welcoming them to America...our country and theirs.

Who Are Refugees?

A refugee is a person who is afraid to go home.

According to the 1951 United Nations convention on refugees, a refugee is a person who "owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership in a particular social group, or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality, and is unable to or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country."

But that description does not begin to tell the story of the traumas refugees endure. Usually forced to leave their homes suddenly, their possessions are reduced to what they can carry—sometimes no more than the clothes on their backs. They flee for safety to neighboring countries where some face inhospitality, many face the harsh conditions of overcrowded refugee camps and all face an uncertain future.

There are 13 million refugees in the world today. When confronted with this staggering number, we must be conscientious about not viewing refugees as a faceless mass. Refugees are individuals. Each has a unique story of suffering and survival, unique hopes for happiness and security, unique strengths and skills and talents to offer to a new community.

How Do Refugees Get Here?

Once refugees cross into a neighboring country, they are interviewed by U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees staff to determine their status. Those who meet the criteria are documented as refugees and allowed to remain in that country, usually in a refugee camp.

Then they wait—for many months, even years. Harsh conditions, overcrowding, lack of privacy, and inadequate food, water, sanitation and medical care are common in camps. Women are especially vulnerable. Everyone faces the grinding tedium of passing time without sufficient income-generating activities for the adults or educational opportunities for the children.

The few refugees fortunate enough to be repatriated often find their homeland devastated by war. Some refugees stay in the country where they are waiting, but other countries have difficulty absorbing refugees into their economies. Resettlement in a third country is an option for less than one percent of all refugees. Each year the president, in consultation with Congress, sets the number of refugees who may be resettled in the United States. Refugees who want to come here must register with a U.S. State Department representative and be interviewed by U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service staff. Those approved for admission are allocated among the 10 U.S. resettlement agencies including LIRS.

You Can Help Refugees

LIRS works with its network of affiliates to choose communities where people seeking refuge will find the greatest chances for success. The affiliates provide local resettlement services in communities throughout the United States. There may be an office near you that could utilize your time, talents and resources to make a vital difference for newly arrived refugees.

Financial gifts to the national LIRS office can be designated to the Friends of Refugees fund, which uses every dollar to meet emergency needs of refugees or to support special projects and programs that serve refugees. You can donate by credit card or send a check to Friends of Refugees, LIRS, 700 Light Street, Baltimore MD 21230.

Financial gifts to LIRS's local affiliates help supplement the limited funds provided by the government for immediate resettlement expenses. Our local affiliates also welcome cash and material donations. All monetary gifts to LIRS and its affiliates are tax deductible.

One-to-One Volunteer Service

Local LIRS affiliates rely on the support of community members to help refugees feel at home. Contact your local affiliate to find out how you can welcome a refugee to your community. These are some typical needs:

English Tutoring—For many refugees, learning English is the first step to achieving self-sufficiency. Help a child with homework, an adult with learning the basic vocabulary necessary to secure a job.

Mentoring—Help someone adjust to American culture by sharing your knowledge and experience. Show a newly arrived refugee how to navigate the bus system. Take a child to a museum.

Translation—Share your oral or written foreign language skills. Translate a document. Interpret at a parent-teacher conference.

Health Care—Medicaid provides limited medical services to refugees. Health professionals who provide free or reduced-rate services can help refugees heal from physical or emotional trauma they may have endured.

Employment Advocacy—Most refugees have valuable work skills and are ready to work soon after arrival in their new communities. Locate job openings, help complete job applications or assist in interview preparation.

Volunteering is rewarding for both new and established community members. Refugees feel welcome and better prepared to face new challenges. Volunteers feel a sense of satisfaction and learn about a new culture.

Sponsoring Refugees

We have looked at many of the ways you can help newly arrived refugees settle into their lives in the United States. Another well-known means of service is to assist in sponsoring a refugee or a refugee family. According to an agreement with the State Department, LIRS sponsors each refugee case and finds local churches or other organizations to serve as co-sponsors. This is one of the most rewarding and challenging ways to meet newcomers, help them integrate into American life and learn about their culture in the process.

Co-sponsorship is not an indefinite commitment. Groups agree to provide specific financial support and other types of help to individual refugees or refugee families for up to six months. Such support may include many of the material donations mentioned previously as well as further financial assistance, especially with housing.

Co-sponsors invest their time and themselves through

- transportation to appointments and job interviews,
- help with job applications, interview skills and work practices,
- school enrollment,
- English training,
- cultural orientation, and
- emotional support.

Co-sponsorship must emphasize transitioning to independence, especially economically and occupationally, as quickly as possible. As a refugee ceases to be a refugee and becomes a neighbor and friend, we are all enriched.

Material Donations

The U.S. voluntary resettlement agencies, in cooperation with the Department of State, have developed clear standards of service for newly arrived refugees. Local LIRS affiliates are responsible to provide appropriate housing, furnishings and supplies for each person they resettle. Material donations from members of the community are a vital part of meeting those standards.

Individuals, congregations and community groups can contribute large items such as furniture, or assemble kits of smaller items such as cleaning supplies. Contact your local LIRS affiliate to find out which of the following needs you can help supply:

Furniture

- appropriate bedding
- drawers or shelves for clothing storage
- kitchen table and chairs
- couch or equivalent seating
- lamps

Kitchen Items

- flatware (knives, forks, spoons)
- dishes (plates, bowls, cups)
- saucepans, frying pans, baking dishes
- mixing and serving bowls
- cooking and serving utensils
- can openers
- baby items as needed

Household Items

- towels, pillows, pillowcases
- sheets and blankets
- alarm clocks
- paper, pens, pencils
- light bulbs

Cleaning Supplies

- dish and laundry detergents
- bathroom and kitchen cleanser
- sponges, cleaning rags or paper towels
- waste baskets
- mop or broom
- trash bags

Toiletries

- toilet paper
- shampoo
- soap
- toothpaste
- toothbrushes
- other hygiene items as appropriate

Food

- nutritious, culturally appropriate food ready to eat upon the refugees' arrival
- additional food supplies and staples, including baby food as necessary, upon arrival and until the family has other income

Clothing

- appropriate clothing for work, school and everyday wear
- hats, gloves or mittens, boots, and coats as appropriate for the climate
- proper footwear
- diapers for children when necessary

These lists cover the bare minimum of items to meet basic human needs for a short period of time. Your local resettlement office can tell you what other items, such as school supplies, could help refugees make the transition to their new lives in a new community.